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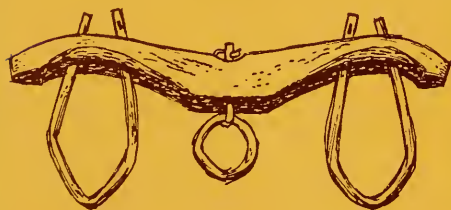
Williams, Peter

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1818

A discourse delivered on the death of Capt. Paul Cuffee, before the New-York African Institution, in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, October 21, 1817.

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A DISCOURSE
DELIVERED ON
The DEATH of Capt. PAUL CUFFEE,
BEFORE
The New-York African Institution,
IN
The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church,
OCTOBER 21, 1817.

By *PETER WILLIAMS, Jun.*

A MAN OF COLOUR.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF SOME MEMBERS OF THAT
INSTITUTION.

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1818

PREFACE

TO

The ENGLISH EDITION.

PAUL CUFFEE, an American and a man of colour, to whom the following Discourse relates, was well known to many in this country, not only as an efficient agent of the **AFRICAN INSTITUTION** in London, and a zealous coadjutor in its benevolent exertions; but also as a firm and active friend of the whole African race.

Soon after Captain Cuffee had been in England, the Editor published a Memoir of him in the year 1812, which, though brief, contains a more full account of events respecting his life, than was likely to be intro-

duced in a Discourse; yet in this will be found some interesting particulars, which are not in the Memoir.

These, however, are not the principal inducements for publishing the Discourse, which is the production of a YOUNG MAN OF COLOUR, and said to be delivered extempore. It does not indeed possess the polish of refined erudition, or of a highly cultivated mind; but its imperfections enhance its value; because they evince that the Author's unadorned eloquence, is the result of *natural* powers, which, like those of the individual concerning whom he spoke, contribute an additional striking proof, that superior abilities do not attach more to a white than to a coloured skin.

DISCOURSE
ON
CAPTAIN PAUL CUFFEE.

ALL around us is crumbling to ruins. The globe totters on the brink of fate. The sun and moon, with all the lesser lights of the firmament, are about to be extinguished, and this whole creation to sink in the night of chaos. Already has that fearful sentence of Jehovah, “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” been executed on the bulk of Adam’s race. Compared with those who have taken up their abode in the silent mansions of the tomb, few are they who remain on the face of the earth. Before the strokes of Death, the generations of men have fallen and perished, even as the leaves before the autumnal blast; and so widely and thickly scattered are their remains, that the whole world has become a Golgotha, in the which there is scarcely left a spot whereon one can set his foot, without standing on the bones of our ancestors and brethren.

Contemplating this scene of desolation, a train of reflections, incomparably gloomy and afflictive, overshadows the mind, and drives down the mounting spirit. What is the destruction of splendid edifices, of flourishing cities, of the most noble works of genius and art, compared with that which death hath made in the family of man! Over the wide and still expanding empire of death, humanity wanders mourning her offspring, the noblest workmanship of God, creation's pride and head, laid prostrate in the dust; the prey of corruption and of worms. Among the fallen, she recognizes her favorite sons, those excellent ones of the earth, whose deeds shed a lustre over her character, and deserve to be held in everlasting remembrance. At their tombs she stops, and recounting their virtues, gives vent to her feelings in loud and bitter lamentations. While, with her, we weep over the graves of departed merit, our attention is peculiarly drawn to the spot which contains the mortal part of our late worthy brother, Capt. PAUL CUFFEE. There, whatever other occasion we may have to mourn the triumphs of the mortal foe, we find cause for the liveliest expressions of grief. There, without the least tincture of flattery, may be inscribed—
“ Here lies one whose exertions, in behalf of oppressed humanity, have entitled him to the esteem of the world, and the grateful remembrance of latest posterity.”

Draw near, O! ye sons of men, and learn, not merely what the common subjects of mortality teach, that “the days of man are but as vanity—that he cometh forth as a flower, and is cut down—that he fleeth as a shadow, and never continueth in one stay;” but the more important lesson of so conducting yourselves as to secure respectability in life, peace in death, and unfading felicities in a future state.

Draw near, but let it be with respectful steps. That GRAVE is peculiarly consecrated to SORROW. Over it Europe and America mourn; and Africa, unhappy, bereaved Africa, pours a deluge of tears.

Were I required to delineate a character of distinguished greatness, I would not seek, as my original, one whose blood has been ennobled through a long line of ancestry, who has had all the advantages of fortune, education, wealth, and friends to push him forward; but for one who, from a state of poverty, ignorance, and obscurity, through a host of difficulties, and with an unsullied conscience, by the native energy of his mind, has elevated himself to wealth, to influence, to respectability, and honor; and being thus elevated conducts with meekness and moderation, and devotes his time and talents to pious and benevolent purposes.

Such an one's character deserves to be drawn by the ablest artist, and to be placed up on high for public imitation and esteem ; nay, the portrait should be placed in our bosoms, and worn as a sacred treasure ever near to the heart. Such an one was PAUL CUFFEE, the son of a poor African, whom the hand of unfeeling avarice had dragged from home and connexions, and consigned to rigorous and unlimited bondage ; subjected to all the disadvantages which unreasonable prejudice heaps upon that class of men ; destitute of the means of early education ; and more frequently struggling under the frowns of fortune than basking in her smiles : by perseverance, prudence, and laudable enterprize, he raised himself to wealth and respectability : and, having attained that eminence, he so distinguished himself by his amiable and upright deportment, and his zealous exertions in the cause of humanity and religion, that he became, not only an object of general notice and regard throughout the civilized world ; but even the untutored tribes, that inhabit the regions of Ethiopia, learnt to consider him as a father and a friend.

If ever there was a necessity for me to apologize to an audience for my inadequacy to my subject, I feel it so on the present occasion. I knew the man. I had the honor of an intimacy with him ; and having, from the first moment of my

acquaintance, an exalted opinion of his worth, which time and a more thorough knowledge of him has served to heighten and confirm, I cannot but regret my inability to present him to you, as he was. In the minds of those who were acquainted with him, my deficiencies will be readily supplied by their recollections ; but of those who knew him not, I must beg that they will consider what will now be offered, not as a finished picture, but as the rude outlines of the character of a man who was truly great.

In his person, Capt. Cuffee was large and well proportioned. His countenance was serious, but mild. His speech and habit, plain and unostentatious. His deportment, dignified and prepossessing ; blending gravity with modesty and sweetness ; and firmness with gentleness and humility. His whole exterior indicated a man of respectability and piety. Such would a stranger have supposed him to be at the first glance.

To convey a further idea of him, it is necessary to recur to his history. He was born in the year 1759, on one of the Elizabeth Islands, near New Bedford. His parents had ten children—four sons and six daughters. He was the youngest of the sons. His father died when he was about 14 years of age, at which time he had learnt but little more than his alphabet ; and having from thence, with his brothers, the care of his mother and sis-

ters devolving upon him, he had but little opportunity for the acquisitions of literature. Indeed, he never had any schooling, but obtained what learning he had by his own indefatigable exertions, and the scanty aids which he occasionally received from persons who were friendly towards him. By these means, however, he advanced to a considerable proficiency in arithmetic, and skill in navigation. Of his talent for receiving learning, we may form an estimate from the fact, that he acquired such a knowledge of navigation in two weeks, as enabled him to command his vessel in the voyages which he made to Russia, to England, to Africa, to the West India Islands, as well as to a number of different ports in the southern section of the United States.

His mind, it appears, was early inclined to the pursuits of commerce. Before he was grown to manhood, he made several voyages to the West Indies, and along the American coast. At the age of 20, he commenced business for himself, in a small open boat. With this, he set out trading to the neighbouring towns and settlements; and, though Providence seemed rather unpropitious to him at first, by perseverance, prudence, and industry, his resources were so blessed with an increase, that, after a while, he was enabled to obtain a good sized schooner. In this vessel he enlarged the sphere of his action; trading to

more distant places, and in articles requiring a larger capital ; and thus, in the process of time, he became owner of one brig, afterwards of two, then he added a ship, and so on until 1806, at which time he was possessed of one ship, two brigs, and several smaller vessels, besides considerable property in houses and lands.

In this part of his history, though not the most interesting, we may discover one of those distinguished traits of character, which rendered him so eminently useful, *i. e.* a steady perseverance in laudable undertaking, which overcomes obstacles apparently insurmountable, and attains its object while others fall back in despair.

Shall I say to you, my African brethren, "*go and do likewise?*" Subjected, as we too generally are, to the multiplied evils of poverty, made more intolerant by the prejudices which prevail against us, his example is worthy our imitation. It is only by an honest, industrious, and prudent husbanding of the means which are placed in our power, that we can hope to rise on the scale of society.

Persons in indigent circumstances, even while neglecting to do what good they can, are very apt to entertain so exalted an opinion of their own benevolence, as to suppose, if they had wealth, they would abound in deeds of philanthropy and charity. But when, in the vicissitudes of human

affairs, their condition becomes improved, their charitable intentions generally decrease, in the same ratio that their abilities to execute them increase. Thus the same man, who was once loudest in his declamations against the rich, for their want of liberality and compassion to the poor, on a change of circumstances, is frequently found equally as unfeeling and illiberal as they, towards those, whom Providence has continued in the humble walks from which he was raised. But Capt. CUFFEE was a noble exception. He rose like the sun, diffusing wider and wider the rays of his beneficence ; until having attained his zenith, even the nations beyond the seas were made to rejoice in his beams. Inspired, in early life, with a desire of benefiting his fellow men, the extent of his means might always be determined by the sphere of his usefulness.

When the state of his affairs were such as to render it necessary that all his resources should be employed in the promotion of his private interests, he was nevertheless, as far as was consistent with this primary object, always willing to advance the interests of his friends, and of the community at large.

Hence, during the rigours of winter, when he was detained from going abroad in the pursuits of business, he usually devoted his time to the teaching of navigation to the young men of the

neighbourhood and the family. And, even on his voyages, when opportunity would admit, he employed himself in imparting to those under him a knowledge of this invaluable science. In these ways he has raised up a number of skilful navigators, both white and coloured. I said that even when it was necessary that all his resources should be employed to his own private advantage, as far as was consistent with this primary object, he was always willing to advance the welfare of his friends and the community. But I was wrong. He went farther. He was so conscientious that he would sooner sacrifice his private interests than engage in any enterprize, however lawful or profitable, that might have a tendency, either directly or indirectly, to injure his fellow men. For instance, he would not deal in ardent spirits, nor in slaves, though he might have done either without violating the laws of his country, and with great prospects of pecuniary gain.—O! that all Christian traders had been actuated by a similar spirit! It would have made the aggregate of human misery an hundred fold less than it is.

In the year 1780, Capt. C. being just then of age, was with his brother John, called on by the collector to pay his personal tax. At that time the coloured people of Massachusetts were not considered as entitled to the right of suffrage, or to any of the privileges peculiar to citizens. A

question immediately arose with them, whether it was constitutional for them to pay taxes, while they were deprived of the rights enjoyed by others who paid them? They concluded, it was not; and, though the sum was small, yet considering it as an imposition affecting the interests of the people of colour throughout the state, they refused to pay it. The consequence was, a law-suit, attended with so much trouble and vexatious delay, that they finally gave it up, by complying with the requisitions of the collector. They did not, however, abandon the pursuit of their rights; but at the next session of the Legislature, presented a petition, praying that they might have the rights, since they had to bear the burden of citizenship; and though there was much reason to doubt of its success, yet it was granted, and all the free coloured people of the state, on paying their taxes, were considered, from thenceforth, as entitled to all the privileges of citizens. For this triumph of justice and humanity over prejudice and oppression, not only the coloured people of Massachusetts, but every advocate of correct principle, owes a tribute of respect and gratitude to John and Paul Cuffee.

In 1797, Capt. Cuffee, lamenting that the place in which he lived, was destitute of a school for the instruction of youth; and anxious that his children should have a more favorable opportunity of ob-

taining education than he had had, proposed to his neighbours to unite with him in erecting a school-house. This, though the utility of the object was undeniable, was made the cause of so much contention, probably on account of his colour, that he resolved at length to build a school-house on his own land, and at his own expense. He did so, and when finished, gave them the use of it gratis, satisfying himself with seeing it occupied for the purposes contemplated. I would not draw a contrast, brethren. The neighbours, no doubt, have long since atoned for their conduct on this occasion in a generous sorrow. But let not prejudice denounce such a man as possessed of an inferior soul.

But it was in his active commiseration in behalf of his African brethren, that he shone forth most conspicuously as a man of worth. Long had his bowels yearned over their degraded, destitute, miserable condition. He saw, it is true, many benevolent men engaged in releasing them from bondage, and pouring into their minds the light of literature and religion, but he saw also the force of prejudice operating so powerfully against them, as to give but little encouragement to hope, that they could ever rise to respectability and usefulness, unless it were in a state of society where they would have greater incentives to improvement, and more favorable opportunities

than would probably be ever afforded them where the bulk of the population are whites.

Under this impression, he turned his thoughts to the British settlement at Sierra Leona; and, in 1811, finding his property sufficient to warrant the undertaking, and believing it to be his duty to appropriate part of what God had given him to the benefit of his and our unhappy race, he embarked on board of his own brig, manned entirely by persons of colour, and sailed to the land of his forefathers, in the hope of benefiting its natives and descendants.

Arrived at the colony, he made himself acquainted with its condition, and held a number of conversations with the governor and principal inhabitants; in which he suggested a number of important improvements. Among other things, he recommended the formation of a society for the purposes of promoting the interests of its members and of the colonists in general; which measure was immediately adopted, and the society named "*The Friendly Society of Sierra Leona**." From thence he sailed to England, where, meeting with every mark of attention and respect, he was favored with an opportunity of opening his views to the board of managers of the African Institution; who cordially acquiesc-

* The "Memoir of Capt. Cuffee" contains an Epistle from this Society, to their countrymen in different lands.

ing in all his plans, gave him authority to carry over from the United States a few coloured persons of good character, to instruct the colonists in agriculture and the mechanical arts. After this he returned to Sierra Leona, carrying with him some goods as a consignment to the "Friendly Society," to encourage them in the way of trade; which having safely delivered, and given them some salutary instructions, he set sail and returned again to his native land.

Thus terminated his first mission to Africa; a mission fraught with the most happy consequences; undertaken from the purest motives of benevolence; and solely at his own expense and risk.

Returned to the bosom of his family and friends, where every comfort awaited his command, he could not think of enjoying repose while he reflected that he might, in any degree, administer to the relief of the multitudes of his brethren, who were groaning under the yoke of bondage, or groping in the dark and horrible night of heathenish superstition and ignorance. Scarcely had the first transports of rejoicing, at his return, time to subside, before he commenced his preparations for a second voyage; not discouraged by the labours and dangers he had past, and unmindful of the ease which the decline of life requires, and to which his long continued and earnest exertions gave him a peculiar claim. In

the hope of finding persons of the description given by the African Institution, he visited most of the large cities in the union, held frequent conferences with the most reputable men of colour, and also with those among the whites who had distinguished themselves as the friends of the Africans; and recommended to the coloured people to form associations for the furtherance of the benevolent work in which he was engaged.

The results were, the formation of two societies, one in Philadelphia, and the other in New York, and the discovery of a number of proper persons, who were willing to go with him and settle in Africa. But, unfortunately, before he found himself in readiness for his voyage the war commenced between this country and Great Britain. This put a bar in the way of his operations, which he was so anxious to remove, that he travelled from his home at Westport, to the city of Washington, to solicit the government to favor his views, and to let him depart and carry with him those persons and their effects whom he had engaged to go and settle in Sierra Leona. He was, however, unsuccessful in the attempt. His general plan was highly and universally approbated, but the policy of the government would not admit of such an intercourse with an enemy's colony.

He had now no alternative but to stay at home and wait the event of the war. But the delay,

thus occasioned, instead of being suffered to damp his ardor, was improved by him to the maturing of his plans, and extending his correspondence, which already embraced some of the first characters in Great Britain and America. After the termination of the war, he with all convenient speed prepared for his departure, and in Dec. 1815, he took on board his brig 38 persons of the dispersed race of Africa ; and after a voyage of 55 days, landed them safely on the soil of their progenitors.

It is proper here to remark that Capt. C. in his zeal for the welfare of his brethren, had exceeded the instructions of the Institution at London.— They had advised him not to carry over, in the first instance, more than 6 or 8 persons ; consequently, he had no claim on them for the passage and other expenses attending the removal of any over that number. But this he had previously considered, and generously resolved to bear the burden of the expense himself, rather than any of those whom he had engaged should be deprived of an opportunity of going where they might be so usefully employed. He moreover foresaw, that when these persons were landed at Sierra Leona, it would be necessary to make such provision for the destitute as would support them until they were enabled to provide for themselves.

For this also he had to apply to his own resources, so that in this voyage he expended out of his own private funds between three and four thousand dollars, for the benefit of the colony.

Whether this sum will ever be made up to his heirs, is not for me to determine, but whether it is so or not, this act of his deserves to be placed on record, and handed down to posterity as a proof of the warmth of his benevolence, and of the purity and disinterestedness of his attachment to the African race.

On the arrival of Capt. Cuffee at Sierra Leona, he presented his passengers to the Governor, who gave to each family a lot of ground in the town, besides from 30 to 50 acres of land, according to their number, on a spot about two miles distant from it. Afterwards, in a letter which he wrote to England, in answer to one which he had received, requiring him to say what should be done for the advantage of the new comers, he prudently advised, that a house should be built for the accommodation of their families on each of their farms.

His stay at the colony, at this time, was about two months, and when he took his departure, particularly from those whom he brought over with him, it was like a father taking leave of his children, receiving the tokens of their overflow-

ing affection, and with pious admonition, commending them to the protection of God.

Oh ! never, never to be forgotten scene. When the doleful tidings shall be there announced, that he is numbered with the dead, what tears will flow at the recollection of its every circumstance.

The exclusion of American vessels from the trade of the British colonies, by the late treaty, rendered Capt. C. (in order that he might prosecute his designs) very solicitous to obtain a licence for his vessel to trade to Sierra Leona. He had, indeed, been urged to connect himself with the institution of London, and to sail as supercargo in British bottoms and to British ports ; but with this he was unwilling to comply, though he knew the business would be very lucrative. Considering himself, to use his own phraseology, as a member of the whole African family, he was unwilling to leave that part of it which was in America, in its present state : “ My wish,” said he, “ is for the good of this people universally.” His last voyage had been undertaken at the risk of having his vessel and cargo seized and condemned ; and, though he escaped, he could not think it advisable to run the same hazard again. He, therefore, wrote to his friends in England, to try to obtain a licence for his vessel, and to make some other arrangements which he deemed necessary for another voyage. Whether these

arrangements were ever made, I cannot say, but if they were, it was not until after he was seized with that complaint which terminated his labours and his life. He was taken ill some time in February, and expired on the 7th day of September, in the 59th year of his age.

During his illness, the subject of ameliorating the condition of his brethren, continued deeply impressed on his mind, and occupied his decaying powers in an extensive correspondence with their friends; and, though he was unable to serve them as he had done, he was gratified at finding his views adopted by a number of the most benevolent and influential men in the American Union.

Such was his public character. Such was the warmth of his benevolence, the activity of his zeal, and the extent of his labours, in behalf of the African race. Indeed his whole life may be said to have been spent in their service. To their benefit he devoted the acquisitions of his youth, the time of his later years, and even the thoughts of his dying pillow.

As a private man, he was just and upright in all his dealings, an affectionate husband, a kind father, a good neighbour, and a faithful friend. Pious without ostentation, and warmly attached to the principles of Quakerism, he manifested, in all his deportment, that he was a true disciple of Jesus; and cherished a charitable disposition

to professors of every denomination, who walked according to the leading principles of the gospel. Regardless of the honors and pleasures of the world, in humble imitation of his divine master, he went from place to place doing good; looking not for his reward among men, but in the favor of his heavenly father. Thus walking in the ways of piety and usefulness, in the smiles of an approving conscience, and the favor of God; he enjoyed, through life, an unusual serenity and satisfaction of mind, and when the fatal messenger arrived to cut the bonds of mortality, it found him in peace, ready and willing to depart. In that solemnly interesting period, when nature with him was struggling in the pangs of dissolution, such a calmness and serenity overspread his soul, and manifested itself in his countenance and actions, that the heart of the greatest reprobate, at beholding him, would have responded the wish: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."

A short time previous to his exit, feeling sensible that it was near, he called his family together to bid them adieu. It was an affecting scene. A scene of inexpressible solemnity—of tears and bitter anguish, on the one hand, and christian firmness and resignation on the other. His wife and children, and several other relatives, being all assembled around him, the good old man

reached forth his enfeebled hand, and after shaking hands with each, and given them some pious advice, he commended them to the tender mercies of Jehovah, and bade them all a final farewell. After this his mind seemed almost entirely occupied with the eternal world. "Not many days hence," said he to one of his neighbours who came to visit him, "Not many days hence, and ye shall see the glory of God; I know that my works are all gone to judgment before me;" but he subjoined, "It is all well; it is all well."

I could add many particulars, but it is unnecessary. He is gone. He lived the life, and died the death, of a christian. He is gone whence he shall never return, and where he shall contend no more with raging billows, and with howling storms. His voyages are all over; he has made his last, and it was to the haven of eternal repose. The clods of the valley now cover his mortal part, and screen it from the tempests which rage and spread desolation on the earth; and, his spirit made free from the wearisome load, has fled to its account at the bar of its God. Thither could we follow it, we should learn the importance of fulfilling our duty to our Creator, to our fellow-creatures, and to ourselves. He is gone, and where shall we find his fellow? Among the almost innumerable multitudes that have sprung from the land of Ethiopia, where shall we find

one that is qualified to fill his place? Oh! why was he not longer spared? For bleeding Afric's sake why was not the mortal shaft warded from his bosom, and lodged in the hearts of some of those monsters who prey upon her blood? O, Lord! we presume not to arraign thy councils. Thou knowest what is best. Though clouds and darkness are around thee, justice and judgment are the habitation of thy seat. Teach us, O heavenly father! teach us resignation to thy will, and we shall find it all to be right in the end.

My brethren of the African Institution, he is gone! and he has left it as his dying request, that you should continue together for the furtherance of the great work in which he was engaged. Hear an extract from one of his late letters on the subject. After mentioning the societies, that which we compose, and that established in Philadelphia, he says: "I wish these Institutions to be brought as much into action as possible; by these means the coloured people of these large cities would be more awakened than from an individual, and a stranger, and thereby prevailed upon for their own good."

Will you then regard this earnest desire of his heart, or will you now, that he shall be no more among us, neglect the object for which we were formed, and depart every man his own way? Oh,

no! let us continue, if not from respect to his memory, from regard to the great interests of Africa, which, at this moment, require that you should watch over them with peculiar care. You should now supply the place of Paul Cuffee. Your exertions may have much influence over those important measures, which are now in agitation about colonizing the coloured people of these states.

My brethren of the African race in general, Capt. C. was an advocate of African colonization. He wished to see that part of our nation, which are dispersed and kept in a state of bondage and degradation in christian countries, returning to the land of their ancestors, carrying with them the light of science and religion, and diffusing it through those vast benighted regions. By this means he hoped, that our curse would be converted into a blessing, and Africa speedily brought to enjoy all the advantages of civilization and christianity. My brethren, Capt. C. was a judicious and a good man. His thoughts run deep, and his motives were pure. Such was his reputation for wisdom and integrity, that his neighbours always consulted him in all their important concerns; and, oh! what honor to the son of an African slave, the most respectable men in Great Britain and America were not ashamed to seek to him for counsel and advice!

Moreover, brethren, he was our friend. Let us not then hastily condemn a measure to which every fibre of his heart clung, and from which it could only be separated by the strong hand of death ; a measure in which he was made the instrument of interesting a number of the wisest and most benevolent men, both here and in England, and which is generally approbated by those who have proved themselves friendly towards us. Let us suspend our judgments of it, until we see its further developement. Let us watch over it as that from which God, in his providence, may be intending to bring us good ; and if, after we have seen the whole arranged, and carefully examined its parts, we find cause to disapprove, it will then be time enough to rise up in opposition against it.

In the meanwhile, let us instruct our children in the knowledge of letters, the necessary mechanical arts, and all the branches of useful science. Let a spirit of union and friendship prevail among us, and every facility in our power be given to all who are endeavouring to rise to wealth, to knowledge, and respectability. Above all, let us endeavour to promote morality and the interests of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. So shall we be the better prepared for whatever may be our future destinies ; we shall pay the most suitable

tribute of respect to the memory of our departed friend; we shall improve our condition in this life; and attain the felicities of God's kingdom, when this scene shall close.



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